DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 675 CS 009 868

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| AUTHOR | Wagner, Betty Jane |
| TITLE | Whole Language: Integrating the Language Arts--and Much More. ERIC Digest. |
| INSTITUTION | ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC. |
| PUB DATE | Dec 89 |
| CONTRACT | RI88062001 |
| NOTE | 4p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, Smith Research Center, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47405 (single copy, free; up to 10 no-cost items, $2.00 postage and handling). |
| PUB TYPE | Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Classroom Environment; *Language Arts; Language Research; Primary Education; Reading Writing Relationship; Student Centered Curriculum; *Teacher Role |
| IDENTIFIERS | Emergent Literacy; ERIC Digests; *Whole Language Approach |

ABSTRACT

In response to a current grass-roots movement among teachers, this ERIC digest provides an overview of the whole language approach. The first section outlines what whole language is, and the second section enumerates what whole language is not. The third section discusses what happens in whole language classrooms, and the final section discusses theory and research supporting whole language. (NKA)

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December 1989 DIGEST

ED313675

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# *Whole Language: Integrating the Language Arts—and Much More*

*by Betty Jane Wagner*

One of the liveliest current grass-roots movements among teachers in the 1990s is the Whole Language approach. Support groups for teachers, Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL), have sprung up all over the country. Major conventions of the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, as well as other conferences, include well-attended sessions and informal get-togethers of teachers who want to share their commitment to Whole Language.

This commitment on the part of teachers is reflected in Vermont's requirement that all new teachers have a Whole Language background. In 1987, New York State mandated teacher attendance at seminars on Whole Language concepts. Many foresee a Whole Language approach replacing reliance on the basal reader especially in California, largely because of the California Reading Initiative.

## *What Whole Language Is*

Whole Language is a set of beliefs about how language learning happens and a set of principles to guide classroom practice (Goodman, 1986). These include:

- The function of language—oral and written—is to construct meaning (Altwerger, et al., 1987).
- Language is both personal and social. It serves thinking and communicating.
- Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are all learned best in authentic speech and literacy events. Learners achieve expressive and communication purposes in a genuine social context (Newman, 1985).
- The learner builds on prior knowledge and operates on ever-developing "hypotheses" about how oral and written language operate (Smith, 1983).
- Cognitive development depends on language development, and vice versa (Wells, 1986).
- Readers predict, select, confirm, and self-correct as they make meaning out of print; the goal is comprehension.
- Writers choose their own purposes as they write for various audiences (themselves, peers, teachers); the goal is to make sense out of their experience and imagination.
- Learning how to use language is accomplished as learners use language to learn about the world. The focus is on the subject matter (e.g. spiders, the Oregon Trail).

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## What Whole Language Is Not

The Whole Language movement is in part a reaction to a trend that has characterized for several decades much of educational practice, especially at the elementary school level. This practice has focused on the mastery of reading and writing skills, leaving little time in the school day for reading for pleasure or writing on topics of one's choice. Characteristics of this conventional belief system and practice are:

- Reading and writing are best broken down into tiny components to be taught in isolation and tested as discrete units.
- Until children master the skills of phonics, word recognition, spelling, handwriting, etc., they are not ready to do actual reading or writing.
- The sequences of isolated skills in teacher's manuals for basal readers and in standardized tests mirror developmental stages of growth.
- Children learn best when they read from simplified basal readers that tightly control vocabulary and sentence structure. For primary children such textbooks are often organized around phonic patterns.
- Writing instructions begins with handwriting and copying to master the basic skills.
- Punctuation is learned through workbook and ditto sheet exercises.
- Reading and writing competence is reflected in the scores on tests of "sub-skills."
- Children who do poorly on "sub-skills" are diagnosed as poor readers, no matter how they comprehend what they read. Children who cannot be made to work on skill sheets may be diagnosed as behavior problems.

## What Happens in Whole Language Classrooms

- Teachers often read aloud or tell stories to children.
- Children choose their own reading material much of the time.
- Skills are acquired naturally in the context of meaningful oral interaction and literacy events.
- Objects and learning centers in primary classrooms frequently have labels. Sets of directions, including information on storing materials, are written on charts or activity cards to guide children's engagement with materials.
- Teachers assemble classroom libraries of trade books representing unabridged, unsimplified literature. For beginners, predictable plots and repetitive refrains invite the children's involvement as co-creators (Routman, 1988).
- Children have daily opportunities for uninterrupted reading.
- Teachers model the act of reading and writing by reading and writing themselves while the children do so.
- Teachers model reading by reading high-interest, predictable big books, pointing out the words as the children read along with the teacher.
- Teachers sometimes guide children's reading, showing them how to predict, ask appropriate questions, and map what they have read.
- Teachers foster discussions of books, encouraging learners how to talk about the moral and ethical issues presented in literature, or to connect fiction with their own lives.
- Children participate in literature circles in which they share and talk about books they have read (Atwell, 1987).
- Small groups report on information they have learned from books.
- Children turn stories into scripts, rehearse them, and present them as puppet shows, plays, or tapes.
- Children usually choose the topics they want to write about.
- Teachers sometimes demonstrate writing by putting the children's contributions onto experience charts that can then be read together.
- Children write and illustrate their own books that are shared with the class.
- Teachers coach children through the various parts of the writing process (prewriting,

- Teachers coach children through the various parts of the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing), conferencing with them at various stages.
- Children meet in small groups to read their own writing and get responses from their peers.
- Children meet in pairs to edit their written work together before copying it for publication.
- Teachers support student-centered learning by creating a literate environment, stimulating interest by helping children connect new experience with previous experience, and facilitating the learners' achievement.
- Teachers integrate the language arts by developing the curriculum around broad themes, such as Indians or mammals.
- Teachers evaluate the progress of learners by documenting their ongoing work in the classroom, analyzing their reading miscues and progress in invented spelling, and keeping portfolios of their writing to show growth (Goodman, et al., 1968).

## *Theory and Research Supporting Whole Language*

Whole Language is consistent with the most respected understandings of how children learn, some of which go back to the early decades of this century. Whole Language is rooted in the seminal work of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, James Moffett, James Britton, Michael Halliday, Donald Graves, Margaret Donaldson, Gordon Wells, Glenda Bissex, Kenneth Goodman, Anne Haas Dyson, and Shirley Brice Heath. These theorists and researchers have shown that human competence in oral and written language grows as language is used for real purposes—without formal drill, intensive corrective feedback, or direct instruction. Children learn as they engage as active agents constructing their own coherent views of the world and of the language human beings use to interact with the world and with each other. The development of writing and reading is fostered by meaningful social interaction, usually entailing oral language. "Language learning is different from other school subjects. It is not a *new* subject, and it is not even a *subject*. It permeates every part of people's lives and itself constitutes a major way of abstracting. So learning language raises more clearly than other school courses the issues of integration" (Moffett and Wagner, 1983). One pervasive response to this understanding of language is the Whole Language movement.

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*This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.*